

Game Review: Cyberpunk 2077 1.61 (PlayStation 5 Edition)

JOUR628E: Video Game Review Writing

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They'd dreamt of it since 1988.

At the end of the Reagan era, tabletop gamers were introduced to Mike Pondsmith's *Cyberpunk*, a dystopian role-playing game in which players could take on the role of a cybernetically-enhanced character venturing through the fictional world of Night City. Unlike almost anything that had been seen at the time, players could create completely customizable characters, which they then outfitted with upgrades, body enhancements, weaponry, skills, and almost anything else that came to mind. They could hack into computer systems, disable their enemies remotely, jump over fences and buildings after installing the right body upgrades, grow mechanical tentacles, enhance their bodies with shimmering chrome, increase their intelligence to terrifying levels, and break into computer networks in the pre-mainstream-Internet days of bulletin boards and subscription online services. If they could dream it and describe it, odds are they could do it within *Cyberpunk*.

Decades later, it would only make sense for it to become a video game.

Cyberpunk 2077, developed and published by CD Projekt Red, was initially announced in 2012, its initial trailers surfacing in 2013 prior to beginning four years of development by a team of 500 people in 2016. It would later be released for the PlayStation 4, Google Stadia, Windows, and Xbox One platforms on December 10, 2020, with initial reports from Statista stating that more than 13 million copies of the game had sold on its launch day alone. The game would later be considered one of the greatest technical disappointments in video game history, with players complaining of errors that made the game essentially unplayable on the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One game consoles as well as all but the highest-end Windows PCs.

This, in turn, led to a firestorm of complaints, negative feedback, and class action lawsuits against CD Projekt Red, which faced allegations that the company had released a product with known technical problems that it had tried to downplay. The company handled these claims with a \$1.85 million settlement that was approved by a federal judge in California's Central District on January 7, 2023, and payments were distributed to CD Projekt Red shareholders for roughly \$0.49 per eligible share. The company would release gigabytes upon gigabytes of update and patch files which eventually improved the quality and playability of the game but to players using a PlayStation 4, Xbox One, or low to mid-end Windows PC, the conventional wisdom behind *Cyberpunk 2077* became to reduce the graphical quality to its lowest settings, keep their expectations low, and hope for a passable framerate to play the game with.

As time went by and the negative feedback continued, the game's triple-A marquee price of \$59.99 fell. Its Steam storefront price was reduced to \$29.99 and its resale value was slashed to the point that it became common to find used copies of the game for approximately \$15 online or in GameStop locations. Still, players began to speak positively of the game's performance for the next-gen PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X consoles, and CD Projekt Red offered free access to an optimized version for these systems upon installing the PlayStation 4 or Xbox One version in these consoles, which arguably had the necessary hardware to run the game.

This brings about the question of where *Cyberpunk 2077* currently stands, especially on the PlayStation 5 console. In April of 2022, with the PlayStation 5 still in relatively rare supply thanks to COVID-related supply chain constraints, I began to look for a PlayStation 5 with which to play the highest-end games on the market. After a quick search and post on Facebook, I found a local seller willing to sell an extra unit he had for \$600 cash. We agreed to meet at a nearby police station parking lot to avoid any potential conflict (or, as the seller put it, stabbing), and I managed to get in a fender bender on the drive over, awkwardly clipping a road barrier to avoid a road race I didn't know would be taking place that day, and doubling my insurance premiums for the next three years in the process. Still, I returned home with the sealed PlayStation 5 in hand, unboxed it, set it up, and was off to the races as far as the newest games were concerned.

Acquiring a copy of *Cyberpunk 2077* for the PlayStation 4 proved considerably easier, as the copy I ordered from eBay retailed for \$17.77 with shipping and didn't involve a small vehicular accident in which my fender and dignity emerged somewhat dented.

The long and the short of *Cyberpunk 2077* for the PlayStation 5 is there's a good game here, but it's wrangled through about the longest, most arduous path possible to get where it is.

And it still needs some work.

Following dozens of gigabytes of downloads and updates, the game currently stands at version 1.61. Further patches are expected before the game's anticipated *Phantom Liberty* expansion pack, which is slated to be released this year, arrives, and there's the feeling that the development team is still chasing bugs where applicable.

Cyberpunk 2077 drops the player into the world of the legendary tabletop role-playing game created decades ago, allowing them to create and play as a character known only as "V". From the outset, the player can control every aspect of the character's appearance down to their gender, gender identity, physique, skin

tone, available genitalia, scars, blemishes, piercings, eye color, hair color, and hairstyle. The character's background profile can also be customized, and the player can choose from the Nomad, Streetkid, or Corpo lifepaths, each offering their own attributes that affect gameplay and potential choices available to the character.

Once a series of introductory and tutorial missions have been completed, the game kicks into full gear, a failed heist to retrieve a computer chip from the headquarters of the fictional Arasaka corporation leads to V's installing the stolen chip into their head, their apparent death, the character's resurrection in a landfill, and an ongoing battle to prevent the failing chip from killing the character as well as having their character's persona be wiped out by the digital ghost of deceased rock icon and former anarchist, Johnny Silverhand, played by Keanu Reeves, setting *Cyberpunk 2077*'s story in motion.

Throughout the game, players can take on missions, build their character's respective abilities, purchase and install new modifications and traits, craft new weapons and items, and sculpt their character in almost every way imaginable. Like the tabletop version of the game, hacking and engineering play an important part in *Cyberpunk 2077*, and should you choose to put your points into your character's Intelligence stat every time you reach a new level, you'll find yourself able to hack into networks as a "netrunner," and capable of remotely scanning and disabling enemies at a distance, a practice that can turn the odds in your favor before heading into a large-scale conflict.

In spite of the assortment of controversy that followed *Cyberpunk 2077*'s release, there's a considerable amount the game gets right. The game's look and feel are amazing, and with full graphical options, such as ray tracing, enabled, there's almost nothing like the world of Night City after dark during a rainstorm, the game's light sources reflecting beautifully off the city streets, puddles, and hieroglyphic neon graffiti. Certain nods have been made to science fiction masterpieces such as *Blade Runner* and characters can be seen walking through rainstorms carrying illuminated LED umbrellas while floating zeppelins scroll ads offering random dystopian services, and the game shows just what the PlayStation 5's hardware is truly capable of.

Other areas in which the game excels include a good tutorial system in the beginning that quickly teaches you the ins and outs of your character and the world they inhabit, an effective autosave system that saves on semi-frequent checkpoints, and a viable battle system wherein computer-controlled opponents will catch you off guard if you're not careful, but computer-controlled allies even out the battle and genuinely make a difference when fighting in larger conflicts. These elements culminate wonderfully in large-scale battles in which you may have to hack into nearby computer systems to weaken your opponents, then take on the rest with the guns, swords, fists, rockets, energy weapons, and grenades in your arsenal, a

hit-and-run approach letting you inflict damage, then slip behind cover, heal, and plan your next move.

Keanu Reeves' Johnny Silverhand character alternates between being a protagonist and an antagonist with respect to the player's V character, initially trying to possess and/or kill V and then shifting the relationship as time goes by. The "drunken rocker asshole" motif he seems to wear as armor hides a hurt, vulnerable side that wanted a better world to live in. Reeves may not be the most versatile actor to take the stage since Robert Duvall, but he carries the part well, seems to be enjoying himself, and his work holds up to the precedent he's set in *The Matrix* and *John Wick* movies, which is arguably what the game's fans were asking for. For players who may have felt browbeaten by *Grand Theft Auto 5*'s main story from 2013, complete with its ensemble of screeching, self-absorbed characters, *Cyberpunk 2077* evokes a better tale with stronger, more developed characters, a good narrative, and something more upbeat than anything that has yet to be told in the *Grand Theft Auto* series. *Cyberpunk 2077*'s storytelling approaches the depth expressed in *Fallout 4* or *Bioshock Infinity* thanks to detailed, relatable characters stuck in less-than-optimal predicaments and looking for a way out, if available. The narrative is also helped by a variety of perspectives presented within the game, and while a code and computing-based future may be at the core of *Cyberpunk 2077*'s universe, elements of tarot, mysticism, and ample history and lore that can be picked up and read in the form of books, letters, emails, and documents, which round out the clattering assortment of viewpoints expressed throughout the game. The game also asks the seminal question of what defines humanity and/or a soul, and asks aloud if this can be copied, stored, and recreated digitally, or if this is lost once the human body hosting it dies and whether it can ever truly be brought back in a viable form through technology?

Another nice touch is the accessibility of missions, and the copious variety of side missions and side gigs (such as hunting down wayward cyborgs, street racing, assisting the Night City police department, and taking on odd jobs for contacts) that allow you to gradually build your character's experience and abilities. A handy challenge indicator lets you know if the mission will be easy or exceptionally difficult for your current level, and if you'll be completely in over your head if you accept it. Simply select the mission you want to go on, click "Track Objective," and a handy GPS indicator on the game's map will guide you to the start of the mission. In cases where you do find yourself having taken on too difficult a mission, it's easy to switch over to another, more manageable task with no penalty, and you can readily pick and choose what you want to do in the game without feeling pressured to complete the main mission and storyline.

Where *Cyberpunk 2077*'s failures are concerned, they can be significant, but they never actually break the game or make it unplayable, as was the core complaint from enraged users following the game's initial launch in late 2020. A very occasional

frame rate sync error led to a flickering effect on some characters, but the main error sometimes surfaced in the physics engine, which led to the bodies of slain enemies floating in twisted configurations on surrounding scenery such as staircases. A strange floating book in an office as opposed to laying on a nearby desk seemed odd, and a character seemed to be sitting on an invisible chair at one point. The game had to be reloaded from recent save points on two occasions during roughly 30 hours of gameplay, the first when a car I was driving was essentially embedded in a nearby wall during one mission, only to become immovable and impossible for my character to exit from, and the second when an aerial drone I was piloting froze in place. Finally, the bodies of slain enemies seemed to occasionally disappear at times. While this didn't affect the mission or the gameplay, it seemed apparent that the CD Projekt Red QA and development teams still have some debugging to do.

Even with these kinks left to be sorted out, *Cyberpunk 2077* pulls you in, makes no apologies for what it is or the world it presents, and like the very best role-playing video games, makes you WANT to return to this world, play the game differently, expand your character's abilities in new ways, and max things out. This is the kind of game that offers you hundreds of choices as to new ways to flesh your character out, and even if you're content with the character you've built, there's an itch at the back of your mind that wonders what would happen if you expanded their abilities, such as ramping up their agility and hacking the next time around... Fortunately, and this is a nice add-on, you can return to the last save point before the final mission to continue leveling up your character, expand on new abilities, and try different choices that can alter the final ending of the main plotline. *Cyberpunk 2077* may have some remaining blemishes to clean up, but the core mechanics are there, it's amazing to take on and build your character, and the action and gameplay are second to none.

As much as people either love or loathe *Cyberpunk 2077* given its launch history and copious array of assorted bugs, I'm not angry at the final product in and of itself. *Cyberpunk 2077* was released with an almost unparalleled amount of hype, legacy, and history both behind it and feeding it. According to Jason Schreier of *Bloomberg*, the game was being developed simultaneously alongside the REDengine 4 which powers it. This led to an experience that was "trying to drive a train while the tracks are being laid in front of you at the same time," as noted by an anonymous source within CD Projekt Red's development team. This also came at a time when the development team of approximately 500 people worked for four years immediately following the release of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt - Blood and Wine* expansion pack in May of 2016, and the creation of a new game engine along with this hurled a considerable monkey wrench into the gears of the complex engine known as game design.

What this comes down to is the difference between promises, expectations, and what can actually be delivered. CD Projekt Red began dropping hints of *Cyberpunk 2077* in 2012 and the expectations built up exponentially from there. They already

had resources committed to *The Witcher* franchise and its expanding number of offshoots, and management and marketing apparently got further ahead of where its new engine was in terms of its development. The company, which could rightfully be considered callous in its decision to release an unfinished product when it did (hence the class action lawsuits and irate gaming community), needed another year to work on the project, adequate QA, honesty with itself and where it stood with its milestones, and a realization that the *Cyberpunk* property, along with the love and adoration of its fanbase, wasn't going anywhere. This also, unfortunately, hit at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and the in-between time between when the next-gen consoles that could adequately play the game were being released, the disrupted supply chain, the sum of this creating a perfect storm of chaos surrounding one of the most anticipated video games ever released.

What's present in *Cyberpunk 2077* is good, even if it needs some final fixes and refinements that will hopefully be found in the version 1.7 update, and I think the REDengine 4 may be where CD Projekt Red wants it to be for the upcoming *Phantom Liberty* expansion pack and the intended sequel. That being said, I want to see what they can create with it and will eagerly download it and play it when they do.

Final Score: 87 out of 100